DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 203 CS 206 832

AUTHOR Haugen, Nancy S.
TITLE An Investigation of the Impact of the Wisconsin Writing Project on Student Composition.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, March 19-23, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Comparative Analysis; Grade 5; *Inservice Teacher Education; Intermediate Grades; *Program Effectiveness; *Teacher Effectiveness; *Teacher Role; *Writing Instruction; *Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Wisconsin Writing Project

ABSTRACT

A study was undertaken to determine whether participation in the Wisconsin Writing Project (WWP) could influence teacher behavior to such an extent that it affected student writing achievement. Subjects were fifth grade students in six classes taught by teachers who had attended WWP summer institutes and six classes taught by teachers who had not attended the institutes but who were rated as highly competent by their administrators. Writing samples were collected from the students and holistically scored by two separate evaluators. The results revealed that the students of WWP-trained teachers did create compositions of better quality than did control group students. (FL)

**********
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
**********

ED214203

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

# An Investigation of the Impact of the Wisconsin Writing Project on Student Composition

Nancy S. Haugen
University of Wisconsin-Madison
128 Teacher Education Building
225 North Mills Street
Madison, Wisconsin 53706

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, March 19-23, 1982, New York City.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Nancy S. Haugen
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS206832

# THE IMPACT OF THE WISCONSIN WRITING PROJECT ON STUDENT COMPOSITION

A decline in the level of basic skills of students, elementary school grades through college, has been widely publicized and discussed in recent years. Standardized test scores reportedly show an overall decline in student performance, parents complain that their youngsters can't spell, and educators are accused of incompetence. Because writing is so obvious an expression of operational literacy, general impressions of particular students as well as of total programs are often made on the basis of single writing samples. Major news magazines, such as Time and Newsweek, have featured disparaging reports on teaching, and much of their criticism has been aimed at the teaching of writing. In general, these widely distributed publications have focused on teachers' inferior personal writing skills coupled with inadequate teacher-preparation programs which have ignored the need to provide teachers with sound strategies for teaching writing.

Some experts in teaching composition agree (Graves, 1978; Tibbetts, 1979). Many teachers do not like to write, sometimes because of poor writing skills. Furthermore, there are too few teacher preparation programs which include methods of teaching writing. Donald Graves, head of the Writing Process Lab at the University of New Hampshire, reported in 1978 that among 232 education courses offered to aspiring elementary teachers at 36 universities, only 2 were in the teaching of writing (Graves, 1978). Teachers unprepared to teach writing tend to avoid the subject even when mandated by school curriculum.

Since teacher training institutions have long ignored this need to prepare new teachers to teach writing, it seems important that inservice education be directed to this situation. As declining enrollments continue to reduce the numbers of new teachers added to school staffs, the role of inservice education becomes obligatory. On the national level, several programs, such as the Bay Area Writing Project, have been initiated to improve student writing skills via teacher inservice education. In Wisconsin, one of the strongest reaffirmations of commitment to quality in writing instruction is the Wisconsin Writing Project (WWP). The Wisconsin Writing Project is a joint effort of the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Education (Department of Curriculum and Instruction), the College of Letters and Science (Department of English), the Wisconsin Improvement Program, and the University of Wisconsin-Extension. This cooperative program involving the University and K-12 school districts has been well received, and the potential for improved writing competence among Wisconsin students seems promising. In 1981, the Wisconsin Association of Teacher Educators recognized WWP with the Professional Program Award for exemplary work in the development of teachers. The purpose of this study was to determine if the WWP, a unique inservice program for K-12 teachers, has had an impact on student writing, teacher and student attitude towards writing, and school district programs.

The basic assumptions underlying the WWP are that:

1) there is concern throughout Wisconsin that schooling needs to address itself to improving students' composition skills;

2) there is strong interest in improving writing curriculum and instruction at the elementary, middle, and high school levels;

3) outstanding teachers of writing who examine research material, analyze current knowledge, and exchange their own experiences can grow and influence their colleagues;

4) an intensive summer institute can provide these successful teachers with leadership skills which enable them to present inservice programs in their own and other school districts; and,

5) with the cooperation of school administrators and teachers, continuing education programs can be designed to meet the needs of schools requesting inservice work in teaching composition.

A project advisory committee composed of public school teachers and administrators, University of Wisconsin-Madison faculty members, and a representative of the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction guides the WWP in the development and implementation of the project.

After four years of operation, the WWP has trained more than 100 specially selected public school teachers to share with their colleagues strategies to improve student writing from elementary through high school levels. For the past four summers, teams of teachers (one elementary, one middle, one high school) were selected to participate in a four-week institute offered for graduate credit on the U.W.-Madison campus.

At the institutes, teachers researched and developed a process for teaching writing. They polished their own composition skills by completing individual assignments and group writing projects. Over the years, participating teachers have developed writing guides which have been edited by the project director and coordinators. Each guide covers one writing topic, presents practical classroom applications, and generally includes basic information as well as current research. The guide topics become the basis for inservice programs, which are custom-designed for school districts by WWP coordinators and school district inservice committees.

In addition to improved strategies for teaching writing in their own classrooms, project teachers share their expertise with colleagues in their own schools and in other districts via inservice presentations. WWP

coordinators utilize project teachers as consultants for programs designed around district needs and offered through the Continuing Education office in the School of Education in cooperation with University of Wisconsin-Extension. Institute participants who staff these inservice programs receive compensation for their services.

Qualitative feedback on the perceived effectiveness of the summer institutes and teacher-led presentations has been obtained from the teacher/consultants, workshop participants, and school administrative personnel. Positive comments have been generated about both the summer institute and the outreach inservice programs. The goal of the WWP is to meet the needs of students in Wisconsin. This study was made to specifically determine if the WWP has had an impact on student writing.

While the WWP does not promote a standard curriculum for teachers to use with their students, the project does model a particular approach for teaching writing which takes teachers through the process that various researchers advocate as most effective for teaching students to write (Elbow, 1973; Macrorie, 1971; Moffett, 1977; O'Hare, 1973; and others). The following principles are emphasized during the WWP institute.

1) In writing, the process is more important that the product.

2) This process involves at least three steps: prewriting, writing, and rewriting.

3) Process does not mean beginning with orderly, logical thoughts and ending with the same; rather, it means moving from chaos--an abundance of ideas--to order.

4) The writing process is frequently painful.

5) The writing process is extremely personal and individualistic. There are no prescriptions or magic formulas or absolutes--just alternatives.

6) The writing process is learned by doing, not just talking about or lecturing on, the subject.

7) Mechanics, grammar, and usage come last in writing as a process.

After attending a WWP institute, teachers do not teach writing in exactly the same way. Yet there are many areas of agreement. The Guide to Teaching the Writing Process from Pre-writing to Editing, a practical manual written by WWP teachers, summarizes the WWP approach in the following way.

1) Every teacher is a teacher of writing.

2) The writing process is more important than the product.

3) Writing is but one of the communication skills. Work on the interrelated skills of listening, speaking, reading. and writing together for best results.

4) A comfortable classroom climate is necessary for productive writing.

5) There are three stages to the writing process:

   Prewriting--85% of the activity
   Writing
   Rewriting

6) Students make progress in writing by writing frequently and receiving positive feedback.

7) Individual writing conferences during the writing process are useful ways to encourage students, build self concepts, and maintain high morale.

8) All writing assignments should be purposeful and related to the students' world (Smelstor, 1978).

One objective of the Writing Project model is to "make teachers aware of existing knowledge about their subject and the teaching of their subjects" in order to improve teaching strategies (Gray and Caldwell, 1980). Furthermore, the model assumes that teacher behavior has a direct effect on student achievement. Like most innovative programs, however, evidence of the effects of Writing Projects in the classroom is scant, and no effort to document the impact of the WWP in Wisconsin had been made. Researchers such as Dunkin and Biddle encourage evaluation of programs using process - product studies, especially those which involve

"comparative designs wherein classrooms are contrasted for...curriculum" (Dunkin and Biddle, 1974). To assess the outcomes of WWP, it seemed appropriate to include the collection and evaluation of samples of student writing.

This study used a process - product model to determine the impact of a particular approach to teaching writing (the process) on student composition (the product). It was an attempt to determine if a short-term, intensive inservice experience can influence teacher behavior to such an extent that student achievement (writing, in this case) is affected.

## Methodology

The population considered for this experiment included fifth grade students in Wisconsin public schools. In all, twelve fifth grade classrooms were selected from separate and independent school districts. Group one was composed of six classes taught by teachers who had attended WWP summer institutes. A letter explaining the study was sent to each of these teachers, and they all agreed to take part. The six classrooms comprising group two were chosen in the following way. Administrators from non-WWP districts who had expressed an interest in project involvement (by telephone, mail inquiries, or through personal contact) were sent a letter informing them of the purpose and nature of the study. After several weeks, the administrators were contacted by telephone to briefly review the study and to obtain permission for participation. Administrators who granted permission for the study were asked to recommend fifth grade teachers on the basis of interest and reputed ability in teaching writing--the same criteria used to select teachers for the

WWP summer institutes. This procedure was used to assure that the control group was composed of competent teachers of writing similar to those who participated in WWP. In some cases, administrators recommended teachers; in other situations, the task was delegated to principals or curriculum directors. Care was taken to insure that teachers recommended as controls in this study were of the same high caliber as WWP teachers.

The researcher visited each of the 12 teachers in the experiment to distribute and explain the student writing tasks during the month of March, 1981. Each teacher was given a folder containing the following items:

1) written instructions for collecting the data
2) student copies of the two writing assignments
3) forms for record keeping (later used with a random numbers table to sample students
4) a Wisconsin Writing Project brochure.

Upon completion of the writing tasks, participating teachers notified the project office, and the researcher revisited each classroom to collect data and thank the teachers for their cooperation.

After all the data were amassed, a random numbers table was used to select the one student per classroom whose writing samples would be scored. All fifth grade students who had completed both of the writing tasks and were not identified as having an exceptional educational need were eligible for selection.

The writing topics used to generate samples were designed by the researcher in accordance with commonly accepted practices of teaching composition. The topics had to be well-defined with respect to subject, audience, purpose, and form (Moffett, 1979). At the same time, the topics had to be broad enough to call forth personal experiences and

beliefs (Smelstor, 1978). Moreover, since youngsters learn to write using different forms and genres, the researcher wanted to collect more than one writing sample from each student (Farrell, 1981). The above criteria along with personal knowledge of the nature and interests of fifth grade students led the researcher to field test a number of possible topics with fifth graders in classrooms or individually. Based upon student reactions to the topics, the following two student assignments were developed, and copies of the tasks were prepared for each student in the experiment.

ASSIGNMENT #1 - DIRECTIONS:

Think of a special place that you would like to visit. The place can be real or imaginary. Describe the place by telling what you would find there and what you could do there. Tell why you would like to go there. Remember to do your best work.

ASSIGNMENT #2 - DIRECTIONS:

Last time you wrote about a special place. Today I would like to get another sample of your best writing. This time you are to write a letter to a brother, sister, or friend. Try to convince this other person that they should not smoke cigarettes. Remember to do your best work.

To promote standardization, teachers were instructed on how to administer the writing assignments during the first visit made by the researcher. Each teacher was also given written instructions defining the parameters for administering the writing tasks and a short script to be read to the class before each assignment. After examining the teacher materials and the student assignments, an opportunity to ask

questions was provided. The researcher's phone number was included in the teachers' packets to provide further assistance in collecting writing samples if necessary.

The holistic procedure was used to score the two writing samples (narrative and persuasive) generated by each student during the months of March and April, 1981. The scorers included two experienced English teachers who had training and practice with the holistic scoring process. (Both teachers had rated papers for the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's state-wide writing assessment in 1980.) A preliminary practice scoring session was held in May, 1981, to orient the teachers to the task and to give them the opportunity to score and discuss papers as a team. The teachers reconvened in June, 1981, to score the papers for the experiment.

Each randomly selected paper was subjected to holistic evaluation by both of the scorers. The process, which involved rating on general impression, consisted of each reader giving a numerical score (in this case, from 1 to 8, with 8 being the highest score) to each composition. While papers were not analyzed for particular features, Paul Diederich's list of 96 things students need to learn about writing formed the criteria for evaluation (Diederich, 1974). The following categories summarize Diederich's considerations.

1) The Writer - intent, ideas, thoughtfulness, honesty

2) The Whole Paper - planned, organized, with a consistent point of view

3) Paragraphs - distinct, yet joined by effective transitions

4) Sentences - smooth, varied, clear, energetic

5) Words, Phrases, Figures of Speech - clear, appropriate, effective, uphonic

6) Semantics - words appropriate and clearly defined for content

7) Argument and Rhetoric - organization, speaker, words, and sentences are appropriate for audience

8) Style - effective usage and word choice for purpose

Each paper was read and scored by both evaluators. The scores per paper represented the sum of the two evaluators' ratings. Thus, individual paper scores could range from 2-16. The Total Score per student was the sum of scores the student received on both the narrative and persuasive writing assignments. The possible range for a student's Total Score was from 4-32. Table 1 presents the students' composition scores on Assignments 1 and 2 along with the Total Scores.

Table 1

WRITING SAMPLE SCORES

| | Assignment 1 Rater 1 / 2 | Assignment 2 Rater 1 / 2 | Total Scores |
|---|---|---|---|
| | 4 5 | 3 4 | 16 |
| | 5 4 | 4 3 | 16 |
| Group 1 (A) | 5 4 | 5 4 | 18 |
| WWP teachers | 6 6 | 6 5 | 23 |
| | 5 4 | 4 3 | 16 |
| | 7 6 | 6 7 | 26 |
| | | | $\Sigma A = 115$ |
| | 3 3 | 4 3 | 13 |
| | 5 5 | 2 2 | 14 |
| Group 2 (B) | 5 5 | 4 4 | 18 |
| Control teachers | 4 3 | 5 6 | 18 |
| | 4 5 | 3 3 | 15 |
| | 7 7 | 5 5 | 24 |
| | | | $\Sigma B = 102$ |
| | | | $\Sigma A - \Sigma B = 13$ |

Holistic evaluation provides a reliable rank ordering of writers, with acceptable correlations of scoring reliability in the .80's and often as high as .90 (Diederich, 1974; Cooper and Odell, 1977). In this study, the correlations for inter-rater reliability was .85 for the first assignment and .85 for the second writing task.

The experimental design used in this study was a randomized group--two group design, and a non-parametric randomization test for two independent samples was employed to test the significance of the difference between the means of these samples. The randomization test determines the exact probability under the null hypothesis, and it does so without assuming normal distribution or homogeneity of variance in populations involved (Siegel, 1956). Using an alph level of .05, the region of rejection of the null hypothesis was determined to be $\pm$ 42. As it can be seen in Table 2, the combination of scores obtained by the experimental and control groups fall within the significant range. Thus, the null hypothesis that there is no difference between the writing of fifth grade students of WWP teachers and fifth grade students of control teachers, can be rejected. WWP student compositions were scored significantly higher than the writing of control students.

Conclusion

Results of this study support the belief that teachers who have been intensively trained in specific methods of teaching writing indeed have an effect on their students such that student writing scores are higher than those from a comparable control group.

The study was limited to a sample of fifth grade classrooms located in Southern Wisconsin, and, therefore, the results cannot

| | | |

| | | |

be generalized to all classrooms. Furthermore, the achievement data collected via the student composition tasks represent responses to only two different writing tasks at two specific and relatively close points in time. Consequently, the results may not reflect in-depth or long-term accomplishments.

Nevertheless, the significant finding supports the belief that the project is effective in training exceptional teachers of language arts to become even more proficient in their teaching. Furthermore, the results also confirm the value of short-term, intensive inservice programs, and, in so doing, may be useful for directing the development of future teacher inservice programs. Finally, the research shows the benefits of collaborative efforts on the part of public school districts and a university in promoting common goals.

References

Cooper, C. R. & Odell, L. Evaluating Writing: Describing, Measuring, Judging. National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Ill, 1977.

Diederich, P. B. Measuring Growth in English. National Council of Teachers of English, Urbana, Ill., 1974.

Dunkin, M. J. & Biddle, B. J. The Study of Teaching. Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, New York, 1974.

Elbow, P. Writing Without Teachers. Oxford University Press, New York, 1974.

Farrell, E. J. Assessing Writing--Let's Be Fair to Students and Teachers. Today's Education, 1981, 70, 46-50.

Graves, D. H. Balance the Basics: Let Them Write. The Ford Foundation, New York, 1978.

Gray, J. and Caldwell, K. The Bay Area Writing Project. The Journal of Staff Development, 1980, 1, 31-39.

Macrorie, K. To Be Read. English Journal, 1968, 57, 686-92.

Moffett, J. Teaching the Universe of Discourse. Houghton Mifflin, New York, 1968.

Siegel, S. Nonparametric Statistics for the Behavioral Sciences. McGraw Hill , New York, 1956.

Smelstor, M. A Guide to Teaching the Importance of Audience and Subject. Wisconsin Writing Project, Madison, Wisconsin, 1978.